Senators Agree to Close 'October Surprise' Hearings

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Members of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee have struck an unusual agreement to hold closed-door hearings today into allegations that the Reagan campaign in 1980 conspired with the Iranian government to delay release of 52 Americans held hostage in the U.S. Embassy in Tehran.

The committee has subpoenaed 16 witnesses, among them former national security advisers Richard V. Allen and Robert C. McFarlane; former secretary of state Alexander M. Haig Jr.; Alton Frye, senior fellow for national security at the Council on Foreign Relations; and U.S. Ambassador to South Korea Donald P. Gregg, who served as national security adviser to then-Vice President Bush in 1981-88. Only four senators will be allowed to ask questions.

Sources familiar with the investigation said the decision to hold closed hearings on the "October surprise" was an attempt to address two major concerns: the Democrats' desire for a full airing of the affair, and the Republicans' fear that public hearings would be transformed into an election-year "witch hunt" unfairly smearing the Bush and Reagan administrations.

But one committee member, Sen. Frank H. Murkowski (R-Alaska), said he had not been informed of the hearing arrangement until after the fact and criticized the committee for "generating an ad hoc committee with no formal authorization."

Also critical of the arrangement was Allen, who in a June 22 letter to the committee urged that the hearings be open "to full public view." He said in an interview yesterday that he had "long advocated . . . any balanced open forum," and questioned the need for "nuclear secrecy."

The Senate and House are conducting separate investigations into allegations that the Reagan campaign and the Iranian government conspired to delay the hostage release beyond the November 1980 presidential election, thus avoiding an "October surprise" that would propel President Jimmy Carter to a reelection victory.

The House has earmarked up to $2.5 million for a bipartisan October Surprise Task Force whose preliminary report is due by July 1. In the Senate, the Foreign Relations Committee last October authorized its subcommittee on Near Eastern and South Asian affairs to conduct an investigation, but the Senate failed to fund the probe.

Subcommittee Chairman Terry Sanford (D-N.C.) and ranking minority member James M. Jeffords (R-Vt.) nonetheless decided to proceed using available committee funds and apparently developed the idea of closed-door hearings, Murkowski said. Neither Sanford nor Jeffords responded to telephone inquiries.

Under a "procedural agreement" reached early this month, only four senators will question witnesses in a "secure" room on the fourth floor of the Capitol. They included Sanford, Jeffords, Foreign Relations Committee Chairman Claiborne Pell (D-R.I.) and acting ranking minority member Richard G. Lugar (R-Ind.).

Sources close to the Foreign Relations Committee said that Sanford and Jeffords had looked to the committee leadership and perhaps higher for support of the plan. Democratic leadership sources said, however, that Majority Leader George J. Mitchell (D-Maine) had nothing to do with the agreement. The office of Republican leader Robert J. Dole (Kan.) did not reply to inquiries.

Lugar said he was "working on behalf of Republican senators," but would not elaborate. He said the four-man group would likely conduct more than one secret hearing, but expected to finish work in the next two weeks.